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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education in Japan, which consists of non-compulsory kindergarten and day nurseries, focuses on social studies by encouraging young children to develop sound minds and bodies. Although play is considered an important element, kindergarten is at times characterized by the stress associated with the rigid competition of entrance examinations for the higher grades of schooling. However, teachers are currently searching for teaching strategies in accordance with the developmental theories of Bruner, Hunt, and Piaget. The government provides financial aid for both public and private kindergartens and provides parent groups with well-organized home education classes. Social studies concentrates on health, society, nature, language, musical rhythm, and drawing and handwork. Goals of citizenship education include understanding the role of the family, duties to community and nation, the relationship between human beings and nature, and the importance of the history and culture of Japan. In comparison with the United States, the school day and the school term are longer, achievement in science and math is stressed, teaching is considered a prestigious profession, and the illiteracy rate is well below 1 percent. (KC)

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Social Studies in Early Childhood Education in Japan: Implications for the United States

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Social Studies in Early Childhood Education in Japan: Implications for the United States

Kindergartens (Yōchien) were first established in Japan in 1876 during a period of modernization and the importing of foreign ideas. The Frobelian method of education was introduced at that time, and the influence of John Dewey followed in the 1890's. In 1947, the School Education Law mandated that "kindergartens, as well as elementary and secondary schools are included in the school system (Art. 1), and that kindergartens are schools whose aim is to develop the minds and health of children" (Art. 77).[1] At present, Japanese kindergartens are non-compulsory and they are administered with the main goal of encouraging young children to develop sound minds and bodies in cooperation with the home and family. They enroll children aged three and above.

Day nurseries (Hoikusho) serve as pre-school institutions for children aged zero to five years, inclusive, who are in need of institutional care. They are administered by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, while the kindergartens are under the authority of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The purpose of day nurseries is considered to be the same as kindergartens.

The kindergarten school year consists of 220 teaching days or more and four hours a day is considered to be the standard. Kindergartens are required to be equipped with the following aids and equipment:

1. Desks, chairs and blackboards.
2. Slides, swings and playing fields.
3. Building blocks, toys, tools for picture-story shows, picture books and other books.
4. Pianos or organs, simple musical instruments, phonographs and other musical equipment.
5. Implements for health and hygiene, tools for breeding animals, tools for drawing and handicrafts.

The following are normally provided, but they are not mandatory:

1. Radio sets.
2. Projectors.
3. Water playing area.
4. Washing stands for children.
5. Equipment for lunch service.
6. Library.
7. Conference room.

The aim of the kindergarten in Article 77 of the School Education Law (Law No. 26 of 1947) is as follows: "The kindergarten shall aim at bringing up young children and developing their minds and bodies by providing suitable environment for them." Also, Article 78 of the same law prescribes: "In order to realize the aim stated in the preceding Article, the kindergarten shall endeavor to attain the objective in each of the following items:

1. To cultivate everyday habits necessary for a sound, safe and happy life and to effect a harmonious development of bodily functions;
2. To make children experience in the kindergarten a group-life and to cultivate willingness to take part in it as well as the germ of the spirit of cooperation and self-reliance;

3. To cultivate the germ of the right understanding of and the right attitude towards the surrounding social life and aspects;

4. To guide children in the right usage of the language and foster interest in fairy tales and picture books;

5. To cultivate interest in creative expression of children's own through music, play, drawings and other means."[2]

Prior to World War II, the Frobelian method of education was the main focus of Japanese early childhood education, followed by the child-centered method of education according to Dewey. After World War II, new laws and regulations took effect, with the Outline of Kindergarten Education and the Outline of Day Nursery Education relating to early childhood education. The educational plan emphasized educational activities for young children. Play was considered an important element and all early childhood education programs were planned with play as its foundation. The ideal early childhood program was viewed as having a balanced class arrangement of free play and controlled play activities. Early childhood education in Japan also received influence from the concept of group education.

Early childhood education in Japan is often the recipient of the stress associated with the rigid competition of entrance examinations for the higher grades of schooling. At times teachers will attempt to place stress upon the learning of letters and numbers by children or the traditional accomplishments of calligraphy and tea ceremony are often taught with the idea of developing children's concentration and confidence.

Early childhood education is also being influenced by the developmental theories of Brunner, Hunt and Piaget. The means for development of language, perception and recognition in an effective way is often debated by theorists. Some Catholic kindergartens use the Montessori method which is highly valued. Some 260,000 teachers and nurses working in almost 35,000 institutions in Japan are still searching to find the proper teaching strategies usually in accordance with these educational theories.[3]

Due to the ever increasing importance and recognition accorded to early childhood education in Japan, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture set up a ten year program in 1972 to promote and improve early childhood education. The goal was that 70.5 percent of all five year olds would be enrolled, and 17.1 percent of all three year olds would be attending kindergarten by 1982. There would then be 1.5 million children in addition to those already enrolled. They are exceeding the goal which was set in 1972.

The government contributes part of the expenses for the establishment and operation of public kindergartens and local allocation taxes provide the remainder of funds. For private kindergartens, the government provides financial aid corresponding to that for the public kindergartens. Also, half of the expenses for their establishment and operation, measured on the basis of the standard level of costs, is borne by the public authorities.

The Social Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture places great emphasis on encouraging parents to be aware of the important role the home plays in education of young children. The Boards of Education in the cities, towns and villages throughout Japan provide parent groups with many well-organized home education classes. There are currently approximately 20,000 classes in Japan, and over one-fifth of these classes focus on the education of pre-school children. The national and local governments also provide help to parents with questions about home education. This help is given through television or answered by mail.

What is the role of Social Studies in the Early Childhood Education program in Japan, and how are languages and culture being taught through the Social Studies? The Guidelines for Kindergarten Education took effect in March 1964. In the Guidelines the education program is divided into six areas which are: health, society, nature, language, music and rhythm, and arts and crafts.[4] The content of the six areas is as follows:

I. Health

1. To acquire habits and attitudes necessary for a healthy life.

2. To become interested in various kinds of physical exercises and to play them spontaneously.

3. To acquire habits and attitudes necessary for life and safety.

II. Society

1. To acquire habits and attitudes desirable for individual life.

2. To acquire habits and attitudes desirable in social life.

3. To be interested in surrounding social appearances.

III. Nature

1. To protect animals and plants in the surrounding and to be always with natural things.

2. To become interested in nearby natural phenomena and try to see, think and treat them personally.

3. To acquire simple skills necessary for adapting to daily life.

4. To become interested in quantity and figures.

IV. Language

1. To become able to understand when others speak.

2. To become able to speak about what has been experienced and what is to be expressed.

3. To become able to use words properly which are required in daily life.

4. To be always with picture books, picture play, and the like, and amplify imagination.

V. Musical Rhythm

1. To experience the pleasure of expression by singing or playing musical instruments at ease.

2. To experience the pleasures of expression by enjoying at ease the rhythm of moving.

3. To become familiar with music and interested in hearing it.

VI. Drawing and Handwork

1. To experience the pleasure of expression by drawing or making objects at ease.

2. To devise in expressing what is felt or thought of.

3. To use various materials or books.

4. To become interested in beautiful things.

These six areas are considered as tools for teachers to use when the kindergarten curriculum is being planned and developed, and teachers look at the children's level of development as they plan the curriculum.

Social Studies is a natural happening throughout the kindergarten program and is considered natural with all activities such as those involved with health, natural science, Japanese language, music, rhythm, art projects, and homework. The belief is that young children learn about social studies through all the activities they engage in during the school day.

Children are encouraged to cultivate a respectful attitude for the Japanese language. To accomplish this, they develop their abilities to acquire knowledge through the understanding and verbal expression of the correct use of Japanese. The important role of communication in the Japanese language is a salient aspect of early childhood education.

To promote the foundation of citizenship qualities necessary for members of a democratic nation the following goals are included in social studies education:

1. To develop proper understanding of the role of family, duties to the community and nation, and to recognize that mutual respect is the foundation of a democratic society.

2. To develop understanding of the close relationship between human beings and nature, and to foster deep love for one's native community and the nation.

3. To develop understanding of the importance of the history, tradition and culture of Japan and to realize the significance of belonging to the Japanese people.

4. To develop abilities to use basic information in order to understand social life and also to use observation and mental skills to make correct decisions on social matters.

Implications for the United States

The rapid growth of the Japanese economy and its competitive dominating position over the United States in several crucial areas is generating many pertinent questions about how students in American Schools are being prepared for the future. There are grave shortages of workers in the high technology and engineering fields in the United States at the present time and the situation is expected to worsen in the late 1980s and beyond. Japan, with its highly organized and academically oriented educational system, is producing graduates who enter industry and business with a high degree of skill in science, math, and engineering. These skills are essential requirements for a successful economy now and in the future.

Children in Japan spend much more time on academic subjects than do children in the United States. Japanese children are in school approximately 225-240 days every year compared to an average of 180 days for children in the United States, and over 90% of Japanese children graduate from the twelfth grade while only 75%-80% of American students complete this grade. An important relevant factor is that Japanese middle schools have science labs and over 90% of the science teachers have been trained in science at universities. Musical and artistic skills

are also developed in Japanese students with most students developing the ability to play two or three different musical instruments by the sixth grade.

Again, many of these accomplishments are attributed to the longer time spent in school by Japanese students. Also, attendance rates in kindergarten, primary and junior high school are much higher in Japan than in the United States. There is a great realization of the importance of early childhood education in Japan and a close relationship between home and school. The status of and the respect for the teacher in Japan is high. For example, the head teacher and other teachers of kindergartens attached to a national university have the status of a national government official. Public kindergarten teachers belonging to a local government system hold the status of a local government official. Pay grades and salaries are also comparable to other government officials including tax, marine, education, research and medical officials.

Also significant is the high standard of literacy among the Japanese with practically all Japanese possessing the ability to read and write. The illiteracy rate in Japan is estimated to be below 1%, which is less than the United States. There is a definite high level of motivation for learning in Japan. The Japanese education system is of high quality, and the use of technology in education far exceeds the United States.

NOTES

[1] Japan, The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, School Education Law No. 26, Article 1 and Article 77 (Tokyo: Monbusho, 1947).

[2] Japan, The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Preschool Education in Japan (Tokyo: Monbusho, 1981), p. 9.

[3] Taro Hinago, "What are the Characteristics of the Method of Early Childhood Education and Care in Japan?" in Early Childhood Education and Care in Japan, ed. Early Childhood Education Association of Japan (Tokyo: Child Honsha, 1979), p. 31.

[4] Kazuo Akijama, "What is the Educational Content of Presentday Kindergartens in Japan?" in Early Childhood Education and Care in Japan, ed. Early Childhood Education Association of Japan (Tokyo: Child Honsha, 1979), p.25.

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